BROWSERS AND PHONE GIRLS:

THE INTRICATE SOCIALITIES OF FRIENDSHIP, TRUST AND CYBER LOVE IN NIMA (ACCRA, GHANA)

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ABSTRACT

The young men of Nima, a popular neighbourhood in Accra, organize themselves in small age groups that meet almost daily in a specific spot, to chat, play and 'wait', while dreaming together of a better future in a distant elsewhere. The friendships that find root in these so-called *bases*, that often have prolific names such as 'Chicago' or 'Brooklyn', lead to hope and specific modes of action by means of which these young people engage with the city, the wider world and their own aspirations. Taking these bases as an ethnographic vantage point, this paper looks into relations of proximity, friendship, trust and the agency of the young men. In a second moment, the paper's focus turns to the virtual world of these same young men – and their girlfriends – to analyze the new modes of friendship that are shaped by their internet browsing. This paper shows how the modalities and intricacies of online, often deceitful, friendship and love rely on vital localized friendship bonds, defined by trust, of *browsers* in the *zongo.* Browsing opens up new possibilities, but also challenges and erodes existing moral socialities between friends.

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FOREPLAY

Accra 2 August 2014. I am sitting in one of the rooms of Hawa's house after a long day of hanging around in the neighbourhood. All of a sudden Hawa bursts into the room and points to the large Samsung smartphone she holds in her hand. The phone is on speaker and I hear a distant man's voice. As the conversation unfolds Hawa first asks the man, in a friendly but desperate tone, to send her some money, before switching to a more dramatic register crying out whether he still loves her. And if he does indeed still love her, why then did he not send the money as promised, she exclaims? The man, who, as I learn later on, is in the US, protests her questioning of his love and tries to explain to her that he has run out of money and that his friends are saying that all this is a scam. He sounds desperate as well, though his voice remains calm and composed. Hawa becomes angry, 'why do you listen to these friends?!' and shouts, close to apparent despair, 'Why do you hate me? I want to know what is on your mind. I don't know what to think anymore, so tell me everything is ok. I'm so worried you know, I keep on crying all day.' On the other side of the line, the man mutters that she is freaking out.

When the conversation ends, Hawa looks at me with jeering eyes and bursts out in laughter:

> He's paying. Ooh yes, he's paying. He has already paid a lot *kraaah*[1]! Every two weeks he has been paying, but this week he says, hum, he has some bill to pay first. And you know, I was supposed to be at the airport, that was last week, but it wasn't real, it was set up. So he would have picked me up. But I wasn't there. It took him three days of holidays to come to the airport to meet me and I wasn't there.

Both of us sit on the ground in the small and warm windowless room. During her call, I had cautiously closed the door, though most house people were aware of her activities online as she had been making calls without any discretion.

This call and some earlier chats with Hawa sparked a new direction in my research in Nima, a popular neighbourhood in Accra, the capital of Ghana.[2] I had been working with groups of young men and women on friendship, connectivity, futures and dreams, and the topic of *scam*[3] and cyber fraud was omnipresent in many of our conversations.

Founded in the 30ies by Muslim traders as a temporary settling place – coined a *zongo*[4] in Hausa- today Nima is a bustling area that is densely populated, mainly by Muslim migrants from the northern regions of Ghana and more distant parts of West-Africa such as Burkina Faso, Togo, Mali and Senegal (Harvey and Brand 1974).

Its ongoing attraction as a first arrival stop-over – due to its central position in the capital, its affordable housing and the multiple transnational webs and networks that connect Nima to a broader world across West Africa and beyond – makes it a node of intense mobility that keeps growing at a fast pace. Today Nima is under high

spatial pressure (Agey-Mensah and Owusu 2012). As Nima is situated within the historic confines of the city of Accra and is closely surrounded by other, often newer, dense neighbourhoods, there is hardly any space for Nima to grow and expand. People share rooms with parents and children, with other close and more distant kin, with friends, and friends of friends. The official unemployment rate of Nima is one of the highest in Ghana.[5] Many men and women have no regular source of income and many parents do not know how to feed their children on a daily basis. Youth are very creative in finding ways to physically and virtually escape the harsh living conditions in Nima.

In this paper I will look into the specificities that characterize Nima youth's 'art of being global' (Roy & Ong 2011) in very specific local forms of 'friendship'. In a community such as Nima that is predominantly constituted by people with a migratory history, kinship has been complemented, and even partially replaced, by alternative forms and new layers of relatedness, composed through vocabularies and practices of friendship. And this new 'relatedness' is mainly defined geographically, through daily interactions that are shaped around relations of proximity and age. Starting from an analysis of real-time friendship in the *zongo*, the paper follows a particular group of boys and girls, so-called *browsers*, who engage in online friendships and cyberlove relations with men abroad, not only as a means to make quick and easy money, but also as a form of 'worlding' (Simone 2001), referring to ways in which the city allows 'spaces of incapacity and marginality' to reach a larger world (Simone 2011:23). This paper shows how the modalities and intricacies of online friendship and love rely on vital localized bonds of (real-time) friendship of *browsers* and girls in the *zongo,* affecting these bonds in various ways that generate new possibilities, but also erode some of the existing moral socialities between

friends.

FRIENDSHIP AS A FORM OF URBAN RELATEDNESS IN THE *ZONGO*

Nima experienced a first demographic explosion in the 1940s, with the rapid expansion of Accra and the arrival of new Muslim migrants from all over West-Africa who were drawn to the area, as it was close to the market (Owusu et.al. 2008, Bari 2014). In the following years more migrants arrived, counting on the hospitality and help of ethnic allies within Nima's huge Muslim community, as they had no direct kin in Accra they could rely on. After both World Wars, veterans were housed around the presidential palace, and many of them were drawn to neighboring Nima as well because of its lively and popular atmosphere. Within a few decades Nima transformed into a densely populated area. New forms of relatedness such as friendship (*abokantaka* in Hausa) and loyalty sprung up between people living in each other's vicinity. People enjoyed sitting outside together and playing music to entertain themselves. At the same time, the benches were used to discuss the political situation of the country. While the Gold Coast was getting ready to become a new nation state under Kwame Nkrumah, in the alleys of Nima politics was being discussed, political alliances were forged, and one's presence on the benches not only became a mode of entertainment and information sharing but could also turn into a political engagement, or form the basis of a party politics. Football was another binding force that brought neighbors and friends together in bases, and many a football team was founded in the crib of a *base*.

Today still, a *base* is a very popular notion in the *zongo* and refers to a meeting place of friends. Usually it only consists of a few wooden sitting benches placed on a cemented platform in a semi-public alley against the wall of a house. The

notion *base* came into fashion during the musical nights of the 1940s and according to some it was borrowed from the military language of Ghanaian World War II veterans. The neighbourhood of Nima is ethnically very heterogeneous as its inhabitants have roots all over West Africa. Initially when Nima was still in its embryonic state, ethnicity played out between the original landlords (the Ga families)[6] and the 'strangers', the Muslims who were considered aliens in Ga land. For newly arriving strangers, ethnic affiliation and relations of ethnic loyalty were dominant social forms in the *zongos*, but were cutting across neighbourhoods, in ways similar to what Schildkrout (1978) describes for the Kumasi *zongo* in the seventies. Already then, Schildkrout mentions friendship and neighborliness as new emerging forms of sociality: 'relationships between neighbors may become very close, indeed. They may exchange children for fostering or hire rooms in each other's houses for members of their families' (Schildkrout 1978: 103). Today ethnic ties have loosened as second and third generation migrants no longer primarily relate to each other along ethnic lines but rather identify with those they share houses and alleys with, or with those who are age-mates and live nearby. With these proximate friends they share leisure time, worries and care, happy events as well as setbacks and losses. Kinship however remains a crucial line of connection, though sometimes experienced as a burden that one can escape from by migrating to the city, it continues to define loyalties that cut across an area such as Nima. More generally, notions of friendship strongly resonate with notions of kinship. Friendship and kinship are complementary forms of relatedness (Carsten 2000), though among the younger generations, friendship predominantly defines conviviality and an ethos of sharing, trust and care, as exemplified in the plurality of bases and (formal or semi-formal) associations. Bases usually consist of male friends of the same generation, though an occasional

visitor or passers-by, a relative or friend of a base member might join the conversation from time to time. A base is founded when its name is coined. The name will often be painted on a wall next to the base, as a statement of territorialization, and as a claim to this particular part of the public space.

Every day, base members come together to chat, joke, play spar, sleep or relax. Every topic of conversation passes in review: football, politics, travel, the community, sanitation, corruption, poverty and other social concerns. Friendship and solidarity cement the foundation of a base, and bases shape the *zongo's* new networks of relatedness. 'We are all brothers. We are one family. The reason for me to be in a base is *togetherness*' (Issaka).[7]

Nima's bases have much in common with the conversation groups of young men in Niger, called *fada*, which take place around tea making rituals and which are vividly described and analyzed by Adeline Masquelier (2013) in terms of 'masculine waiting culture';[8] these tea circles are called *grins de thé* in Burkina and Mali (Kieffer 2006).

Bases mainly breed on dreams that all young men cherish and share. Names of bases such as *Chicago*, *Boston*, *Brooklyn*, *Michigan*, and *Alshigar Yankee* (literally *I will enter Yankee*, meaning: *I will go to the US*) powerfully express a desire for the US as a dream destination. Leaving Ghana and traveling to the US (or Europe) occupies the minds of Nima's youth and is a common topic of conversation.
In this way, bases are windows onto a larger world. Initially they connected the youth of Nima to the nation state and its new political horizon. Later on they became windows to places beyond Ghana's national boundaries, to the Western world and a better life. Nima's sitting spots thus act as screens on which imaginaries are projected about various elsewheres, but at the same time bases form the real starting point for

actual travels. In some bases contributions are made to finance and organize the travel of a selected base member, with the implicit expectation that once this chosen one has made it to the West, he will support others to join him. The boys of one base, for example, collected money for their brother to travel to the US. However, once he made it to the promised land 'he forgot about us in Nima here' the boys told me. The dream, however, is not given up.[9]

Bases are nuclei of unconditional loyalty and care among age-mates, based on proximity and living in the same neighbourhood, sometimes sharing the same house. These bonds replace kin-based and ethnic relations as the primordial relations of loyalty in a context of migration and strangerhood that is typical for *zongo* communities like Nima. Moreover ethnic 'brothers' cannot be friends as they 'know [one anot]her['s] homeland' (Meier 2004: 50) which means that ethnic relations hinder friendship rather than facilitate it. Knowing one's homeland refers to being ethnically linked (distant or close) and thus being able to forward gossip to the relatives at home. Non-ethnic allies are in that sense better friends as they cannot cause such harm to the migrant's reputation at home. Several young men explained to me how they do not trust kin when it comes to sharing and redistribution, as kin are hierarchically organized, and this inevitably leads to unequal claims and privileges. Relatives do not shun deceit either. Investing in non-kin as friends is crucial and leads to socially more rewarding, and more horizontal, relations of trust, thereby strengthening and broadening one's range of possibilities within the harsh conditions that characterize life in the alleys of Nima. 'You cannot trust people but you have to live together. Friendship is far more important than money' (Issaka). Trusting, as Meinert notes with regard to social life in post-war Uganda, is 'a struggle, a tricky but necessary moral project and a willed action' (2015: 132). Trust becomes crucial in

conditions of uncertainty and indeterminacy, and it often unfolds through experiences of distrust and doubt (ibid.133). Investing in trustful relations may also lead towards a more hopeful negotiation of a different future, as will be described below.
Ultimately, friendship structures daily interactions and claims on shared public and private spaces, and as such it shapes 'networks of support, trust and empowerment' (Gratz 2004: 113, in a discussion of artisanal miners' lives in Northern Benin). Friends help one another in times of misfortune and loss, such as during sickness, or when a death occurs; they share food, networks, (informal) jobs or information about jobs; they also share rooms, cars, motorbikes, music and computers; they celebrate together all pleasant events and transitions, such as birthdays, marriage, birth giving and graduation; they share grief and misfortune. In the public space, friends do not only identify with a particular spot, their base, and with the designated name of that base, but they also refer to each other as *brothers* and comply to principles of confidentiality and camaraderie that include moral obligations towards each other. Base brotherhood even extends into lines of (imagined) classificatory kinship relations, as one not only considers a friend's close relative as one's own, but also uses a vocabulary of kinship referring to a friend's kin as 'mother', 'sister', 'son', implying similar interpersonal relationships and social codes of care and respect.

These semantic reproductions of kin-relations play a conciliatory role in the absence of extended kin-bonds within a situation of extreme heterogeneity.
But friendship is, of course, a double-edged sword. As among kin, the thick bonds of friendship can be shaded by deception, maneuver, quarrels (over money, women, insults) and betrayal, while aspirations and social upward mobility can put pressure on feelings of trust and solidarity, and compromise unrestricted loyalty. Young men who climb the social ladder, by obtaining better jobs, or by marrying or migrating, can find

themselves in the impossibility to continue living in Nima as the appeals for support become too heavy a burden. The fluid constructions of friendship, however, sometimes persist and one's travel or mobility does not necessarily erode resilient base bonds.

U2CANFLY: A GEOGRAPHY OF DREAMS

Every little area in Nima has various bases, sometimes occupying the same alley or gutter, but never on the same spot or bench. Neighbourhoods are named after renowned and popular bases sometimes long beyond the base's lifespan. The map of the genealogy of some of the names reveals a particular home-grown history of the area and shows the dreams, hopes and pursuits of the youth in various overlapping temporal layers.

For those who do not materialize their dreams by traveling abroad, a base serves as a kind of retreat to put life between brackets and as a window to dream about elsewheres. As such, it enables one to nourish the desire and to continue life in the rough and arduous conditions of the everyday. As Mohammed of a popular Nima base commented: 'How could we cope with these circumstances if we could not sit together here (in the base) to joke and make fun of the hardships of life?' The common mode of communication, which is joking, also provides routes of escape and ways of dealing with life. A base is a place of comradeship and resilient bonds, a place where one can ventilate difficulties and distress, and hence make the living conditions tolerable. As the name of one base expresses, *Yenpaba*, which literally means 'we don't give up on hope', bases are spaces of hope and dreaming of a better future, in Nima or elsewhere.

The lexicon of bases is illustrative of the dreams of the youth, as also

exemplified in the name of the base *U2canfly*. One of the base members explains the name's etymology:

> Someone from our area had a contact in the American Embassy and he got visa for many of us who then travelled to the US. In those days (the 80ies, the base was founded in 1984) Europe and the US were representing golden opportunities and many boys really moved to these destinations. Our base name inspires everyone to 'fly', to go away, to spread wings.

Not everyone envisages traveling far away from Nima, though. Many people hope to acquire their own house, something which has become impossible in the densely crowded area of Nima, but which is still affordable at the outskirts of the expensive city of Accra. Staying in Accra does not mean giving up on transatlantic aspirations. Many of the youth invest in searching for contacts abroad in real-time (with friends who have travelled, with visitors from outside Ghana), but also for virtual contacts through the internet.

In the following section I will elaborate on a specific kind of activity that took root in some particular groups of friends, and that has spread like a virus throughout Nima at an incredibly fast pace: browsing and online friendship.

BROWERS, GAME BOYS AND ONLINE FRIENDSHIP

Song by Shatta Wale: *Nima mi Seh*

(Original lyrics in Pigeon English)

If you want a big bag a money then,

a nima mi seh

Range Rover and Camry (type of Toyota),

a nima mi seh Ghetto youth money maker,

a nima mi seh

every time when we roll out, a nima mi seh

where the shatta dem dey alot, a nima mi seh

every ghetto youth dem all say, nima mi seh

(English translation)

If you want a big bag of money, then

I say Nima

Range Rover and Camry

I say Nima, Ghetto youth are you trying to make a lot of money? *(do you want money?)*

I say Nima,

Every time when we go out *(have fun)*, I say Nima,

Where there is a lot of Shatta *(men that make big money)*

All ghetto youth are all saying,

I say Nima,

BROWSERS

The busiest spaces in Nima – apart from the various mosques at prayer time – are the many cybercafés (Burrell 2012). Every day they are packed with youth, from schoolboys and -girls to young men and women. The big and more popular ones have at least fifteen computers, a relatively fast network, printing services, air-conditioning and a generator. Some boys spend their days, or rather nights, at *the café* as it is popularly termed. At night, when life comes to a standstill in the whole of the town, behind the often-blinded doors, ticking and clicking continues, as that is the time the

US is online.

Today it is primarily young men who use the cafés, as 3G on smartphones and modems, and Wi-Fi provisions at home, are keeping the more grown-up costumers at home. A frequent visitor, Ali, estimates that seventy per cent of his age mates (19 years) in Nima use the cyber café because it is faster and cheaper. Ali and his two friends regularly visit the cybercafé: 'Browsing on your phone is slow and expensive and you can easily be traced if you visit banned sites. We prefer to go to the café together, so we can browse together.'

Compared to the nineties and 2000s when cybercafés mushroomed in Accra and Nima (Burrell 2012), the number of cafés has decreased, though the remaining ones continue to be crowded and busy as always. The *cafés* are the places where the very young ones meet, and where they share hopes and dreams about their futures. In that way the cafés replace the older meeting places, some youngsters even call their favourite cybercafé their 'base', thereby adding to the morally collapsing meaning of 'bases' that various informants mentioned. Dreaming in these new places gets a more virtual dimension since many an imagined future is within reach in a few mouse-clicks.

Online friendship is much sought for in Nima, for it is considered an avenue to make 'quick and easy money' as many interlocutors explain. Young men surf and scan the internet hoping to meet someone online with whom they can establish a durable online relationship. Ideally one finds a 'friend' who is in Europe, the US or Canada, locations that seem to guarantee the friend's financial power. Numerous rumours travel around Nima about young boys who are buying land, building houses and driving posh cars thanks to the money given to them by their online foreign friends. The ways in which these friends are urged to donate, however, are not always

all that transparent or straightforward. As we will see, the emotions of the foreign friends are manipulated through stories that elicit pity or that explicitly pressurize moral obligations, something that the boys would never do with their real friends. Boys who spend their days in cyber cafés or online are commonly called *browsers*. Successful browsers are referred to as *game boys* though the distinction is not very clear-cut as the nomination also depends on the age group and the area of Nima.

Among peers, being a *game boy* is considered an achievement, something to pride oneself of. Ibrahim, who is an aspiring *game boy* himself, explains: 'A *game boy* is someone who is into the game. It is very difficult to stay out of the game. Game boys dress and talk in particular ways, they like to show off and to bluff. They wear expensive designer clothes, fancy shoes, jewels such as rings and chains, and they use iPhones. They copy famous musicians such as Shatta Wale and Sarkodie. They spend and blow money in a way that will make you know that they are game boys, for example they celebrate the birthday of their car, they throw pricy parties.' In his book on Ivorian young men, Newell (2012) describes the *bluffeurs* who in similar ways 'bluff' and pretend to be successful by spending money that they have gained in illicit ways, meanwhile paradoxically becoming successful and rich.[10]

Game boys hang around in small cliques of three to five and visit the cybercafés or each other's homes in groups. Surfing the web needs to be done in groups; browsing together is informative and the young ones are elbowing to learn the tricks of the trade from more experienced browsers. In the evenings and at night the popular *cafés* are filled with young boys who swarm around the screens hoping to find avenues to make life more bearable through monetary gains. A few girls too stick around in the *cafés*, but most of them just visit their Facebook pages or mailboxes, though there are some striking exceptions as we will see below.

BOYS WHO ARE GIRLS: ONLINE TRANSNATIONAL TRANSGENDERED RELATIONS

The most popular and successful space to make contacts with potential friends are dating sites. Getting in touch with someone who is looking for a love relation is known to have the potential to lead to a financially rewarding contact, and this is what most boys are looking for.

It is commonly known that the easy targets are –often lonely or single- white men and women who subscribe to dating sites in search of love or (virtual) company. To get in touch with the men, game boys pretend to be girls. They make fake profiles of girls by using girls' pictures, either of existing girls they know (friends or girlfriends, or friends' girlfriends), or online pictures which are copy-pasted from websites, or bought online. Once a contact is established much depends on the social skills of the browser to convince the white man of trustworthy and genuine intentions:

> You have to go slowly and take your time. Sometimes you chat for months in friendly ways. Once you have got a bite, you have to know how to chat with your contact to make him feel comfortable with you. You have to know how to read the mind of the white man and that demands experience and a thorough study of the man's profile. (Bashir)

White, mostly single, elderly, men and women are an easy prey for browsers, and the question is to have enough flairs to keep someone dangling once he has 'bitten', to use some of the jargon. The final aim is receiving money from the contact, money that is sent out of love or compassion. Contacts are aptly called *paypals*, a term that has

become very common in Nima's backstreets. A *paypal* is someone you have a long-term relationship with, with whom you do regular chatting and who sends you money. Ibrahim explained the etymology of the notion of *paypal*: 'Those in Europe and the US we were writing letters to when we were small boys were our *penpals*. Now we write emails and we chat through Messenger with *paypals*, because we hope to receive some cash from them.' (Ibrahim)

The fictitious profiles usually display pictures of white girls, 'because American men don't want black women, they want white girls or *half-half*'. Browsers search on the net for pictures of porn star-like beauties who are supposed to charm the searching lonely white man. Some particular websites sell series of photos of one and the same girl in different less and more erotic poses, and it is even possible to buy video-footage of the girl in various positions. The profile needs to explain the fact that the girl is living in Ghana, but has a white (or 'half-half') colour and so very often girls will be presented as volunteers, expats or NGO workers living in Accra but originally from the US, or as daughters of expats who live in Ghana. Others will be introduced as having a Ghanaian father and a white mother or vice versa. The more experienced its creator, the more the profile is prepared in detail to foresee any imaginable situation or question from the *paypal*.

A browser has to make sure he identifies with his role as a girl and writes girlish talk to his *paypal* to keep the latter interested and flattered. However, after a while many *paypals* demand a Skype or Whatsapp call, which urges the browser to be creative and find a suitable and real substitute of the profile picture. It is in this phase that girlfriends, or friends of friends, can play an active role in lending their voice, obviously in exchange for a part of the profit. Girls like Hawa (in the introduction) take care of the phone and Skype calls and sometimes, and almost inevitably, also do

part of the chatting, once their numbers are known to the *paypal*. Hawa for example has three phones, and receives calls on all three phones from her own friends and different *paypals* almost daily. She works for a few friends who are knowledgeable and skilled in the online friendship business. She reserves one phone for her daily Ghanaian contacts, while the other two serve for her online chatting with *paypals* abroad. She is a good-looking, smart and well-dressed woman in her late 20ies, rather fluent in English and skilled at (partially) hiding her Ghanaian accent. Most people in the house know about her activities and some explicitly condemn it, but they feel rather powerless in preventing her to continue her work. When the browsers need Hawa, they never enter the house, but rather call her to meet in the dark alleys outside the main gate. She explains the division of work to me as follows: the boys make the profile, look for the contact and do the chatting, for a few weeks or months. As soon as the *paypal* asks to make a call, the browsers call on Hawa's services and start using her phone number. A big Samsung smartphone was given to her by the leader of the browsers. This phone she gets to keep and on top of that, she normally takes a share of 20% in the profits. Some boys commission their own girlfriends to make the calls for them. Engaging a girl in the browsing work demands a firm basis of trust, as one needs to share the *paypal's* phone or Whatsapp details with the girl. One informant explains how these girls are often school dropouts. In Nima, stories abound about girls who deceived their boyfriends or friends by searching contact with the *paypals* behind their backs, cashing their money and sometimes even eloping with the *paypal*. The whole setup of online friendship serves several goals, but the main one for the browsers is to receive cash money from the *paypal*, usually through money transfer companies such as Western Union or Money Gram. Some might use the friendship to extend networks beyond Africa, or hope to get an invitation and the necessary papers

to migrate, but most browsers are primarily interested in receiving cash and all means are good to reach this goal. When someone receives money from the 'client', it is said that 'he has hit'. *Hitting* is a very common denomination in Nima and beyond to refer to one's landing money through money transfer.

Browsers will never give out the details of their fake profiles, such as login and password. They will also restrict the information they share with their phone girls to particular Skype, Whatsapp or Messenger details. Both browsers and assistants are depending on one another for maintaining the relation with the *paypal*, and thus share the same ambition of reaping as much money as possible from the contact. This joint ambition cements the illicit bond, even though some girls deceive their accomplices and run away with the *paypal* and his money. If a browser does not have a girl to make the calls for him, other browsers will say 'he hasn't got a phone'.

CYBER-WISE MASTERS AND UNWORLDLY BOYS IN AN ONLINE WORLD OF TRICKERY

The complex socio-psychological aspects of online friendship and fraud require browsers as well as their 'maids' to have the necessary knack, savvy and instinct to keep in control of the game. In the same ways as one needs to be streetwise to survive in a rough urban environment such as Nima, one needs to be *cyber-wise* and have the shrewd alertness to remain in control of the online show.

Beginners make mistakes causing possible clients to slip off the hook. Therefore it is important for them to learn how to be cyber-wise from experienced browsers. Usually young boys visit the café together and try to learn from the more experienced and successful browsers, meanwhile warding off the curious gaze of other visitors of the café (see also Burrell 2012 about how the youth in Accra uses

internet cafés). One only shares screens with friends or masters. A master with a strong reputation, who has been able to have an impressive catch, is called a *hitter* or a *baron* (in reference to the big drug dealers who are called *barons* as well). He is admired for his skilfulness. Being a *baron* means having acquired fast wealth, which is displayed in the way one consumes, dresses and lives.

The biggest *barons* usually move out of Nima, in order to avoid the social pressure and the expectation of redistribution to friends, kinsmen and followers (for a similar observation among Nigerian 419 men, see Smith 2001). When they move, they keep their new address secret, but take along their boys to assist them in their browsing activities. Meanwhile the boys enjoy the privilege of the baron's shared knowledge and his luxury environment. Learning the tricks of the trade happens by watching the master do his work. Sometimes, though, it happens that boys are more cyber-wise than the master is, but depend on him financially and materially (for browsing time, modems, laptops, a safe place to work). A beginner is called a *boy* or *maid.* He will start his cyber career by carrying out petty jobs for the master, such as searching for profile pictures, buying false IP addresses,[11] or doing small chatting jobs in the margins of the bigger work.

Boys very often live with their master and are supposed to serve the *baron* by doing all kinds of non-browsing-related trivial jobs, such as buying food for the clique, bringing messages to colleagues, buying phone credit and cigarettes, sweeping the house, informing friends, or looking for wires, cams and other attributes. The hierarchical relationship between barons and boys can be infringed upon when boys become niftier and smarter than their masters, or when they start to steal clients or critical cyber information from their masters.

Masters spot the boys in the cybercafés and try to recruit those who are smart

and cyber-wise. Getting in touch with a master may also happen through friends, most often friends from one's base. Browsing is very much a collective activity that boys and young men engage in together. They visit the cyber café together and often share one computer (Burrell 2012). Therefore group browsing needs to be grounded in a firm basis of confidentiality and trust, something that the bases offer, though the financial stakes sometimes push relations of friendship to their limits. Networks are crucial in browsing activities and in acquiring the browsing skills. Friends share knowledge and tricks, they share rooms and profit, they even share phone girls and *paypals*.

U2 CAN BROWSE: ONLINE AND REAL-TIME FRIENDSHIP

Not all online friendship is about deceit and luring money out of the (online) friends' pockets. Browsing is also an act of being connected and being global. Young men who have friends abroad hence have networks that extend as far as their dream destinations such as the US and Canada. Youth in Nima are connected with other parts of the world and are therefore virtual cosmopolitans. However, being global depends on local connections, on being locally attached: it is through trustworthy friends and mates at home that one acquires cyber-credibility and –paradoxically- becomes a wizard in treachery and trickery. In other words, the world wide webs of urban youth in Nima are rooted in local friendship bases; being locally grounded in webs of confidentiality helps one to become cosmopolitan.

Browsing is democratic, and any young boy or girl can get the knack of it and go online, assuming he or she has friends who will show their skills. As such, urban Accra offers enormous possibilities and opens new ways and opportunities to make quick money and fast wealth. Online love and friendship can occasionally lead to

actual travels, but it primarily opens up new possibilities to survive in the difficult conditions that characterize a place like Nima. Browsing can give one (increased) financial power, it can raise one's reputation and esteem, it can lead to a new lifestyle and social mobility, but essentially, it can also give one a sense of being in control in a world in which one's place is otherwise defined by marginalization, deprivation, exclusion or unequal access to resources. Conversely, the fast wealth accumulated through online fraud can invert hierarchical relations and propel young conmen into celebrity-like popular figures that live a much envied and admired lavish life. In this sense too, online fraud is democratic: in theory, every boy or girl who has a few Ghana Cedis and who is ready to learn how to browse can aspire to live a life of a star (Burrell 2012).

Some game-boys and phone girls explain browsing as a kind of retaliation. It represents 'payback time' for decades of colonization and exploitation. This is a much heard, but equally often criticized, common discourse justifying the online criminal activities: 'The whites have enslaved us, they have stolen all our resources, they have exploited us and now the tables are turned. We take back our share' (Aisha). Such representation is however morally repudiated by many as 'cheap and easy' and unjust.

TAKAASHI IN A CHANGING MORAL ECONOMY

Cyber fraud in Ghana is still on the rise and some claim it has become a nation-wide phenomenon (Myjoy online 2015). Among the youth in Nima, searching online friends through dating sites is currently the most popular format within the underground economy. The risks are limited, the chances of being tracked are minimal and the malevolence is considered relatively minor. As a kind of 'lesser evil' it is even used as a cover up for other criminal activities. Some robbers and drug

dealers pretend to be browsing to cover up for the sudden upgrading of their lifestyle. Those involved in deceit with the help of spiritual powers (*sakawa*) will certainly play to be browsers so as not to be suspected of other fraudulent engagements. 'If you are born and raised in the *zongo*, you will not find yourself in a good condition. If you don't take time you will find yourself in drug dealing, robbery and prostitution, so you have to find another way of taking care of yourself [refers to browsing].' (browser Jalil)

Reportedly, the offices of Western Union and MoneyGram have the highest financial turnover of Ghana (together with Madina, another *zongo* in Accra). This was confirmed to me by the Western Union managers of Nima (Access Bank, Nima), though figures were impossible to obtain or retrieve. Overall, adults in Nima take an ambiguous stance vis-à-vis browsing. On the one hand, they lament, 'we lost 50% of our youth through cybercrime' (Avalon, leader of a vigilante group in Nima that tries to fight various kinds of crime). They thus condemn the online fraud and theft. Fraudsters are reproached to be lazy, idle, greedy, spoiled and immoral. On the other hand, cyber fraud has taken theft and robbery from the streets of Nima to the virtual, or at least the outside, world. 'Many of the guys are non-educated, but they know how to browse and deceive the white!' Jabila, the landlord of a large house in Nima shouted, almost with pride. Though publicly condemned and combatted in radio programs, cyber fraud has generated a stronger circulation of money in Nima, a higher financial capacity of youth and, as some claim, it has occasioned a decrease in armed robbery and theft.

However, the creation of 'new social spaces that transcend national boundaries' (Zook 2007) has in its turn redefined local relations and the moral economy among

youth in Nima. New worlds of prospects have opened up through the net, and competition has driven a wedge between many friends. The desire for, and the proximity of conspicuous consumption have changed the 'moral fibre' in more intimate and profound ways than the online trickery in itself. Online fraud can generate fast wealth, but these days the successful browser keeps this wealth to himself and only shares with his assistants, if he shares at all. Older forms of redistribution, whereby riches – however modest – are shared with kinsmen, friends and according to patron-client relations have altered drastically. Redistribution is now often limited to the small circle of girl- or boyfriends, helpers and accomplices. Jordan Smith has described similar processes in Nigeria, where 419 scamming has altered relations of power and inequalities in ways that are publicly condemned, 'specifically in the increasingly individualized character of greed, corruption and aspirations of power' (2001:821). Ndjio discusses comparable reactions to the fast wealth of *feymen* in Cameroon in what he calls the 'economy of retention' (2008: 288). As explained before, once materially successful, browsers move out to escape expectations of redistribution. Conspicuous consumption with bluffing as its main goal has encouraged greed and selfishness, thereby destroying former mechanisms of loyalty and friendship.

Many youths complain of this change in morality, especially among friends, as the following quotes demonstrate:

> Now a brother can come and lie to you!

> It has become very difficult to survive genuinely. In those days [referring to about 10 years ago] it was hassling, but it was genuine hassling, but nowadays

> our society is disintegrating
>
> If someone gives you to eat, eat. Don't ask where it came from. There is less trust today, there are opportunities, but there is too much *takaashi*.

Takaashi is a Hausa word that refers to 'to hit someone by foot', or 'stepping on others to become big, taking advantage of others to grow' (Baba, opinion leader). *Takaashi* was mentioned by several adults and youths when discussing morality and friendship. Online fraud has adulterated real-time trust, the online stakes have become too high and the cyber-information has become too sensitive in intensely competitive spaces such as the virtual world. Stepping on others is a way to grow, to escape the *zongo* and to reinvent oneself.

Takaashi drives successful browsers away from Nima, to the new neighbourhoods at the outskirts of Accra, where they can dodge mechanisms of redistribution and expectations of sharing. These transforming dynamics of sharing are obviously not restricted to the *zongo*, or to online friendship and fraud. Several authors have written about similar transformations of the moral economy partially initiated through new figures of youth culture in other parts of Ghana and West-Africa, such as Newell (2012) on *bluffeurs* in Ivory Coast, Ndjio (2008) on *feymen* in Cameroon, Jordan Smith (2001) on *419* conmen in Nigeria. Likewise, in the Ghanaian *zongo* sharing with friends and kinsmen is 'our mentality' as Mohammed has put it; one is expected to apportion the acquired wealth with the immediate allies and especially with friends. Redistribution, whereas expected and almost inescapable, raises someone's status and esteem in the *zongo*. Failure to comply with this expectation is publicly denounced.

CONCLUSION

The World Wide Web has given youths the chance to be agentive and 'world' themselves 'to participate in an emerging, albeit limited, configuration of "world level" transactions that emerge from the initiatives of Africans themselves' (Simone 2001: 26). Meanwhile the social fibre of solidarity, generosity and mutual trust seems to have capsized into a more individualistic, competitive and antagonistic world, thereby altering relations of power, redistribution and inequality in favour of the cyber-wise few, and possibly turning relations of trust into distrust and deception. Browsers and phone girls' relationships are characterized by ambivalence and uncertainty. The girls are initially dependent on the boys for access to (information about) possible clients, but gradually they take control as the embodiments of the *paypals'* longing and love, thereby making the browsers dependent on their skills, willingness and, especially, trustworthiness. Only those who master a sophisticated degree of con artistry succeed in keeping control of these ambivalent relations of dependency and thereby enjoy recognition and fame. The phone girls in their concealed, ingenious and nifty ways not only turn global hierarchies upside down, but also redefine internal gender relations between *zongo* boys and *zongo* girls.

The *phone girls,* as handmaidens of the browsers, fool their American lovers, who live in a distant world that is out of reach but so much desired, as epitomized in the names of many bases and in the outfits and accessories of youth in Nima. They thereby take advantage of the longing for love and attachment of the lonely white males to feed their own desire for wealth and esteem, and by installing very ambivalent relations with their *paypals* in the process. While they mock the foolishness and persistence of their virtual lovers, they make themselves financially

dependent of the money that their lovers send, as such materially mirroring the affective dependency of the men.

One can wonder if these lovers are the new, classificatory, sugar daddies with whom boys and/or girls try to establish relations of transactional but virtual 'love' as they do with wealthy and elderly men at home (Dinan 1983, Mazzocchetti 2009). As such, these online lovers can be situated in a realm of commoditized, ambivalent alliances that is an extension of locally existing modes of relatedness. It is remarkable that the money that is obtained through the hoodwinking activities of browsers and girls is no longer used to physically travel to dream destinations such as the U.S. Rather, many boys and girls prefer to remain in Ghana and upgrade their living conditions by moving out of Nima to self-contained houses, or boost their local status and esteem by adopting new dressing styles and engage in the conspicuous consumption of *blingbling* and fancy goods. The new fame is established and recognized by 'staying in town and showing off', as many interlocutors explained, instead of migrating abroad and returning home, as *zongo* boys used to dream of, and as many of them used to do.

Going back to the various modalities of friendship in the *zongos* we can conclude that the online love or friendship relations rely on strong local bonds of trust and friendship, both among boys themselves, as well as between boys and girls. Boys or young men browse together, thus clustering their skills while teaching one another how to *hit* or find a potential online 'friend'. In a second moment, boys rely on girl(s)-friends to make the phone calls and, in some cases, take over the chatting with the *paypals*.

Acts of deception and fraud are thus paradoxically grounded in relations of ambivalent 'tricky' trust (cf. Meinert 2015) among friends in the neighbourhood. At the same time, the browsing activities are morally defying the bases of trust and loyalty because of the wealth and external possibilities that the fraudulent activities smuggle into the local social world. *Takaashi,* or 'stepping on others' to enrich oneself, as it is aptly called in the backstreets of Nima, stirs distrust and socially isolates individuals, while distrust in turn opens possibilities for social upward mobility or for leaving Ghana.

Friendship among age-mates, as an urban form of kinship in an extremely heterogeneous setting such as the *zongo*, generates hope and new possibilities, if only to put life between brackets while dreaming together of a better life elsewhere. Online friends (*paypals*) across the ocean are not only trapped by the joined forces of friends and their webs of deception in the virtual world; we can assume that *paypals* themselves are also tricked by mechanisms of self-deception as a way of dealing with this highly uncertain and untrustworthy context of the net. Online relations are highly ambiguous as they allow for fake and constructed identities. Self-deception, to a certain extent, then becomes a way of dealing with the extremely uncertain and untrustworthy context of the net, and paradoxically leads to building up trust as a state, which is in principal beyond the control of the person (Pedersen and Liisberg 2015). In summary, friendship builds on, and in turn generates, trust, which may then lead to the formulation of an anticipatory hope in a fundamentally different future, even though one is also acutely aware that such hope may be disappointed or betrayed in the end. A friend too may disappoint, for example when leaving his group of friends behind to start a new life elsewhere without acknowledging the support of his

former friends or reaching out to them from his new station in life. Nonetheless, some of these greedy successful browsers are envied as well, which is yet another form of recognition from his friends.

I have shown how friendship and kinship can be considered as different complementary layers of relationships, but how friendship is more malleable and may entail more genuine relations of trust, more easily achieved through social processes of reciprocity, support and loyalty than in classic kin-based relations. An urban migratory context provides a good pretext to get away from the burden of kinship and the normative relations and claims kinship relations imply.

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Notes

[1] *Kraaah* is a slang expression to emphasize what one has just said.
[2] Fieldwork has been carried out in Nima in two periods: from June till August 2014 and in April 2015.
[3] The internet fraud is commonly referred to as *sakawa*, but *sakawa* is a very specific techno-religious mode of fraud that involves spiritual power and that, though very

popular nowadays, remains out of the scope of this paper (see Burrell 2012, Warner 2011, Oduro-Frimpong 2014).

[4] *Zongo* is a common term in Hausaphone West-Africa that refers to a temporary settling place of Hausa-speaking Muslims (Schildkrout 1978). Some say it is originally written as *zango* and literally means 'station' or 'stranger quarters' (Bari 2014 p. 379). Most urban towns in Ghana have a *zongo* where newly arrived inhabitants, usually Muslims, can settle.

[5] The 2010 Ghana Population Census estimated a high unemployment rate of about 37% in East Ayawaso Constituency (Nima) (http://www.statsghana.gov.gh/pop_stats.html accessed 13/09/17; see also CHF 2010).

[6] The Ga are one of the ethnic groups of Ghana and are part of the Ga-Adangme group that mainly inhabits the coastal areas, the Eastern Region and the Volta Region. The Ga are the original inhabitants of Greater Accra.

[7] For the sake of unanimity, all names of informants –with the exception of formal representatives- have been replaced by pseudonyms.

[8] The word *fada* is occasionally used in Nima as well, especially in those bases where the members originate from Niger. These bases are also called *ataia* or 'tea' bases, as the conversations in these bases are known to be organized around a tea ritual as well (see Masquelier 2013 for a more detailed analysis on the role and meaning of preparing tea in the *fada* of Dogondoutchi in Niger).

[9] Similarly Masquelier (2013) describes how in the *fada* in (a Hausa-speaking part of) Niger young men, while discussing and preparing tea, carve out new futures for themselves in a context of crisis and boredom.

[10] The *game boys* or *browsers* have similarities with the Cameroonian *feymen* as described by Malaquais (2001) and Ndjio (2008), who states that 'feymen are the iconic figures of the new modalities of wealth creation', the result of a successful monetary quest through 'the economy of fraud, swindle and deception' (ibid:271).

[11] Ghanaian IP addresses are banned from many of the American and European dating sites, precisely because of the Ghanaian internet users' bad reputation of being fraudulent users (Zook 2007 explains this for the Nigerian state in relation to *419* networks).